

COLORADO CANYONS NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA
Advisory Council Meeting Minutes
October 10, 2002

Attendees:

Doralyn Genova	Greg Gnesios	Harley Metz
Warren Gore	Marian Atkins	Jane Ross
Joe Keys	Jim Cooper	Lovell Sasser
Russ Walker	Mel Lloyd	Palma Wilson
	David Ludlam	Steve Yamashita

Greetings and Introduction

Warren Gore called the meeting to order at 3:05 p.m. Warren introduced himself, as did the other council members. Warren asked guest speaker, Steve Yamashita, from the Division of Wildlife (DOW), to take the floor.

Horsethief Canyon State Wildlife Area

Steve provided the group with a brief history of the Horsethief Canyon State Wildlife Area (SWA), and then explained the DOW's policies in managing this area, which adjoins the Colorado Canyons National Conservation Area (CCNCA). The DOW manages this area under a cooperative agreement with the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR).

The BOR acquired the area, along with several other areas, in 1989, when it was picked up as mitigation property for wetland habitat replacement. Horsethief Canyon SWA has been designed and managed to mitigate for critical wetland habitat lost when the Highline Canal was lined, blocking groundwater seepages necessary for wetlands survival. The BOR is not structured to manage land, and an agreement was made for DOW to oversee the area. The BOR provides the DOW with funding for Horsethief's management and staff. The DOW's current goal is creating a permanent wetland habitat. The two priorities for the area are, first to mitigate lost wetlands, and second, to provide for recreational use.

Steve addressed the issues and concerns resulting from the private property adjacent to the Horsethief area, especially those of the subdivision, Pollock Canyon Estates. The access from Highway 340 is a Mesa County Road to the boundary of Horsethief, at which point DOW maintains the road. While the subdivision has expressed concerns with DOW's maintenance of this section of road; DOW's position is that road maintenance is sufficient.

Greg Gnesios, CCNCA Manager, added that BLM had learned of a previous road maintenance agreement struck between the subdivision and the BOR authorizing the subdivision to grade the road on a semi-annual basis. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has no management responsibility in the area, but access to the Wilderness via the Pollock Bench is an issue for the agency.

Steve continued discussing the issues, and along with road maintenance being a concern for the subdivision, a small parking lot situated at the subdivision's entrance is thought by some homeowners to represent an invitation for trespassing. The BOR and DOW's position is that the common boundary of the property is well signed, and any trespassing occurring now is difficult to control.

Many commented that the road is in the best shape they have seen it in the past several years. Steve added that the BOR prefers to retain control of its portion of the road to ensure proper access for managing the wetlands, and is opposed to the county taking over maintenance.

Shooting and hunting in the area was also discussed. In order to properly manage wildlife, hunting must be allowed. Much of what is harvested in the Horsethief area is accomplished through archery and muzzle loading. The majority of high-power rifle hunting occurs up in the area adjacent to the BLM land.

Jane Ross, CCNCA Planning Team Leader, pointed out that she had recently learned of another private parcel in which the owner is willing to sell. Although the parcel is outside the National Conservation Area's (NCA) boundaries, a land exchange is possible and could benefit the Horsethief Canyon SWA.

Warren stated that, while he understands the safety issues involved with hunting in close proximity to private residences, the public's strong support for hunting and language supporting hunting in the CCNCA's enabling legislation, would make it difficult for him to support any recommendation from the public for banning rifles in the area.

Jane emphasized that issues lie more with target shooting, than hunting. Steve added that the DOW does not allow any target shooting on its property.

Russ Walker asked about other areas where public land adjoins private land, and how those areas have dealt with hunting/shooting conflicts, if any. It was pointed out that private-property owners can legally hunt on their own property. Elsewhere, homes are immediately adjacent to public lands, and many of these areas have been closed to target shooting. Hunting is still allowed. Doralyn Genova shared that most complaints received by the county are with target shooting, and not hunting.

CCNCA Land Health Assessment

Harley Metz, BLM Ecologist, provided the group with an update on the land health assessment of the CCNCA, in which the report was recently mailed to the Advisory Council members. The BLM's intent is to allow the council members the month of October for reviewing the document. Harley will return to the November meeting to discuss the document with the Advisory Council prior to its finalization.

The process of land health assessment originated with the Babbitt administration, and since that era, a number of resource advisory councils have refined the standards. A local BLM team formed to develop the CCNCA assessment handed out to the Advisory Council. The assessment is based on an Ecological Site Inventory done in 1993, and Harley explained the various zones within the CCNCA, along with their unique habitat. This assessment process addressed each standard for each zone, and the results have become the benchmark for future assessment. A worksheet was completed for evaluating whether a zone met the standards, with a rating of healthy or unhealthy then assigned to that zone. The majority of the CCNCA meets the land health standards, although some areas are suffering from tamarisk, knapweed, and/or cheatgrass invasion. In some areas, the native components are missing, but the land can still be classified as healthy.

The BLM has to look at the causes of the problems, what problems are solvable, and then focus on those areas that have the best chances of successful recovery. The Advisory Council's responsibility is to decide on priorities for the area, by factoring in budget and the area's innate potential for successful restoration. Also key to these decisions is whether the council wants native vegetation only, non-native species, or a mixture.

Warren asked Harley to address Sieber Canyon, and Harley stated that since white man's existence in the area, vegetation has been removed, resulting in extreme erosion. Harley added that grazing management is critical to revegetation of the area. In riparian areas, cattle are not the problem, tamarisk is. The BLM is undertaking a tamarisk removal program, but it will be a monumental task. The Advisory Council is expected to provide guidance on how to proceed. Harley also reported that off-highway vehicle (OHV) abuse is nonexistent for the most part, only noticeable around trailheads and parking lots. The areas not subjected to heavy recreational use maintain a diverse community of vegetation.

Russ asked about the black biotic crusts, and the areas where those communities should exist. Harley confirmed that biotic crusts are not expected to exist everywhere within the CCNCA; the plants are soil specific and require fluffy, sandy soil. Only in the past 10 years have the Colorado Plateau crusts come to be better understood and valued. Their relationship with other vegetation is critical.

Harley added that because a species is missing from the land does not necessarily classify the land as unhealthy. Rather, it may be secession in process. Both fire and grazing can facilitate a healthy land environment.

Warren asked whether the Advisory Council could expect recommendations in this matter from the BLM, and Harley indicated that it would. Harley reiterated that the focus should be on those areas with the most potential for a productive recovery.

When asked about funding for this restoration initiative, Harley responded that no monies are earmarked for restoration within the NCA. It will likely take grants, partnerships, and BLM MOUs with other governmental agencies to become a reality. Meanwhile, seeding and various grazing systems will be used to facilitate restoration.

Setting priorities and reasonable expectations will be the hardest decisions for the Advisory Council. Timing for making these decisions is impacted by the alternatives being developed. Jane indicated that February 2003 is the likely timeframe for these decisions, as the draft plan must be at the printer by next August.

The BLM is working on other creative ways to accomplish land health. Mesa State College's curriculum now includes a land restoration class, and the BLM has agreed to allow Devils Canyon to be used in a class project. Additionally, Lynae Rogers, BLM Rangeland Management Specialist, is working with a Delta correctional facility in growing shrubs for replanting in Rabbit Valley.

The Ruby Canyon plan allows for some action to be taken now. Harley stated that the BLM had underestimated the affects of drought, which has severely impacted some areas in the NCA. One positive from the current drought is that the cheatgrass invasion may have been slowed by the lack of moisture. Harley added that, if the drought cycle continues, damage to the land could reach extreme levels. If moisture returns, the land recovers surprisingly well.

Lovell Sasser pointed out the vast differences in weather spanning across small distances, and it was agreed that additional weather stations could be helpful in knowing actual conditions across the CCNCA.

There was a 10-minute break.

BLM Update

Greg informed the Advisory Council of BLM's continuing resolution, recently extended to October 11, and as of yet, no funding has been approved for fiscal year 2003.

The BLM had a successful Public Land's Day, on September 28, at Dinosaur Hill. The quarry trail was completed, with dinosaur vertebrae "props" installed. Greg reported disturbing news in which the last 24 hours had seen the Dinosaur Hill facilities vandalized with spray paint.

Grant training had previously been scheduled for October 24-25, and due to schedule conflicts, it has been moved back to an unconfirmed time in December.

The NCA staff has received draft copies of the Northern Arizona University (NAU) study. Once the report has been reviewed, the staff will present key findings to the Advisory Council. Greg is interested in comparing differences in the area, with the initial survey having been done in 1993. Greg feels the report will be a good guiding document, with much of the information extremely useful to the Advisory Council in developing the plan's recommendations.

Greg added that the NCA staff was disappointed, and somewhat frustrated, with the recent cancellations of the last two Advisory Council field trips for the River Corridor and Rabbit Valley area. A lot of effort was invested in planning these trips, and the BLM remains hopeful that the trips can happen next spring. For future trips, the BLM will cancel the trips unless four Advisory Council members have committed to participating. Admittedly, everyone is busy with other commitments, but this plan requires the Advisory Council's commitment. Jane informed the members that comments from the public were received on these cancellations, as well. Comments included expressions of disappointment in that individuals, that had applied for the Advisory Council and were not chosen, are recognizing the apparent apathy being shown. The group agreed to schedule these makeup field trips in January 2003 for spring 2003.

Jane reported that the BLM Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) met this past week, and will continue to meet for the next several weeks. This team will draft the plan document, based on the alternatives developed through the combined efforts of that team, the Advisory Council, and the Working Groups' recommendations.

The Mack Ridge Working Group has scheduled a facilitated meeting for October 28, 5:00 p.m., at the BLM office, for the purpose of drafting a final statement and vision for the Mack Ridge area. The Wilderness Working Group will conduct a similar meeting on October 29, 6:00 p.m., at the BLM office. Brian Hopkins, from the BLM Glenwood Springs field office, will be the meeting facilitator. Although some Working Group members feel these meetings are unnecessary, Jane feels that, after all the groups have been through, some kind of closure is needed. The Advisory Council agreed that remaining flexible throughout the planning process is important, as more issues may develop with time. The Advisory Council will be forced to address those issues without the Working Groups' input, if those groups completely disband.

The Rabbit Valley Working Group meets on October 15, at 5:45 p.m., in the Fruita Civic Center, and an OHV specialist from the BLM State Office is scheduled to attend.

Public Comment

Lovell was introduced by Warren and given the floor for a brief presentation. Lovell is an active member in both the Mack Ridge and Rabbit Valley Working Groups. Lovell

prepared a display of photographs reflecting images spanning from 1986 to the present. This collage provided the Advisory Council with a good “tour” of the area they would have seen had the cancelled field trip taken place. Evidence of OHV damage, and the resulting erosion, is apparent in many of the photographs. Lovell reported that the number of equestrians using the area is decreasing. Jane asked Lovell what her and her community of users’ biggest concerns are, and Lovell responded that 1) new mountain bike tracks have appeared on the top ledges, and 2) defining the Limits of Acceptable Change for the areas.

There were no other comments.

Doralyn finished up by agreeing with an earlier statement in that we are loving the area to death. And, how do we plan for this? Greg indicated that use would only continue to grow with the “national” status and publicity the area is sure to receive. Jane added that statistics show that use is increasing in conjunction with the State of Colorado’s growth. Greg said that education is critical to the CCNCA’s future.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:00 p.m.